

# Charles's Ideals, Pragmatism and Strategy: An Impossible Mission?

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The discussion whether the unprecedented size of Charles the Fifth's world-empire warranted to him some kind of «universal monarchy», arose as early as his election as Roman Emperor. From 1519 onwards, chancellor Gattinara launched the idea that the imperial title procured rights to a world hegemony. His views have been commented extensively in the propagandistic writings of the time, both from the Valois and the Habsburg sides; historians in their turn paid wide attention to them. However, as the distance grew between the emperor and his chancellor since 1525, we have to distinguish clearly between ideology and political practice <sup>1</sup>. For Charles himself, his title had mainly a meaning in the tradition of the Roman emperors, imbued with a theological mission of protection of the Church, keeping peace among the Christians and defence of Christendom against the heathen. The emperor's special responsibility not only legitimated his actions against the Ottomans and their allies, it also made him consider anybody as his enemy who opposed his endeavours to establish peace among the Christians <sup>2</sup>. Formulated in this way, one can discern a religious and a profane component in the emperor's mission. Although one can attribute some of Charles's political decisions to that theological inspiration, the question deserves to be raised in how far exactly these arguments or maybe other, of a more down-to-earth kind, may have motivated his actions. On a secular basis, the preservation of the unity of the Habsburg dynasty and the expansion of its territories may just as much have driven the emperor as his dignity as the «Rex regum». Moreover, for the sake of propaganda the worldly arguments may well have been hidden behind more elevated ones. Since very few unequivocal personal statements by the mature Charles have been preserved, the whole discussion of his political ideals therefore needs to be tested by his actions.

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<sup>1</sup> HEADLEY, J. M., *The emperor and his chancellor. A study of the imperial chancellery under Gattinara*, Cambridge, 1983, and his contribution to this volume.

<sup>2</sup> KOHLER, A., *Karl V 1500-1558. Eine Biographie*, Munich, 1999, pp. 94-100.

Such a test requires an insight in the strategic options any ruler in his position would have had to envisage. Moreover, one needs to evaluate his attitude in practice: in how far can it be understood from his principles, either religious or secular, or even a combination of both? Can we distinguish the propaganda as it was deemed necessary for the justification of political behaviour of the kings from their real motives? Don't we have many indications of Charles's preparedness to negotiate on a very pragmatic basis? It may be worth to systematize his evaluations, choices and decisions in one sense or the other. Finally, the question may be raised in how far Charles's alleged ideological or strategic visions might have contributed to his ultimate failure to reach his goals. If he could be pragmatic in many respects, why was he obstinate and hard-minded in some others? Was this lack of flexibility in the last instance not the main reason for his failure to preserve the unity of his empire, that of his dynasty and that of western Christendom?

In order to examine these questions, I shall first consider more closely five domains in which Charles has shown his tough mind and for which he was prepared to invest great efforts. In a second section, this paper will discuss equally five domains in which we can observe the emperor's pragmatism. Finally, the strategic possibilities and necessities will have to be evaluated.

The first domain will be that of the imperial authority. The emperor considered the prerogatives of the unique dignity which had been bestowed upon him as a gracious gift from God and therefore as an unalienable mission. In his mind, it gave him pre-eminence over other Christian kings about which no discussion was possible. The main field where he tried to implement this role, was that of his frequently declared ambition to take the lead of a crusade against the Turks. When in 1529 Pope Clement VII suggested to Charles that King Francis I would be prepared to join him on an crusade if the leadership could be shared between them, he simply refuted this idea<sup>3</sup>. Instead, throughout the 1520s, he repeatedly tried in various treaties to impose on Francis and Henry to follow him on a crusade against the Turks. Nothing of this kind ever happened, even not after Charles's extensive complaint before the Cardinals in Rome in 1536 that Francis had treacherously launched an attack against the duchy of Savoy while he himself was just on his way back from fighting the infidel in Tunis, which campaign had been officially labelled as a crusade. But Charles kept stubbornly to his idea, and even in the treaty of Cr py of September 1544 he gave up all his territorial gains in northern France, acquired after months of campaigning with a huge army under his personal command, in return for Francis's promises of support against the Turks, described in detail as 600 men heavy cavalry and 10,000 infantrymen<sup>4</sup>. The idea of the imperial supremacy could not be expressed more clearly by any other mission than a crusade.

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<sup>3</sup> RODRIGUEZ SALGADO, M. J., «The Ten Commandments», en BLOCKMANS, W. P., y MOUT, M. E. H. N. (eds.), *The World of Charles the Fifth*, Amsterdam, 2001 (in preparation).

<sup>4</sup> KOHLER, A., *Karl V...*, op. cit., p. 293.

From the Tunis campaign in 1535 onwards, Charles took personally the lead of all his major campaigns, while before his coronation by the pope he had left the battlefields to his generals. He took his crusading mission so deeply serious, that in his mind even his wars against France and its allies got a touch of holiness since they prevented him to fulfil his holy mission.

In connection to the uniqueness of the imperial authority, one can also mention Charles's harsh endeavours to secure it for his son and successor Philip after his brother Ferdinand's death. In the difficult negotiations at held Augsburg in the winter 1550-1551 between the emperor and his brother about their succession, Charles knew that the German constitutional tradition as well as loyalty to his brother imposed the imperial crown to pass to the Roman King, which had been Ferdinand's title since January 1531. However, he failed to see that the German Prince-Electors would oppose strongly to the idea of electing Philip as Roman King, which he himself tried very hard to push forward. His view of one emperor, one Habsburg union, one confession was coherent but outdated. The heavy clashes about the succession between the two brothers reveal Ferdinand's more flexible attitude towards political and religious reality than Charles's, and probably his better insight in the power relations within the empire <sup>5</sup>.

The second domain in which Charles's attitude can be considered to be tough and firmly keeping up his high principles, is that of the respect due to his imperial authority. Especially during the 1540s, we can observe the concepts of lese-majesty and «absolute imperial authority» to be invoked frequently to impose his policy. The first concept was applied systematically and demonstratively in the repression of urban revolts. The most impressive case certainly was that of his native city of Ghent, which had opposed to stern tax demands in 1537, as a consequence of which relations between the government and the city deteriorated so heavily that Charles's constitutional act, granted at his inauguration in 1515, had been publicly cut into shreds, officials had been put under serious threats and a new local administration had been installed. Following the proposals of his learned councillor jurist Louis Van Schore, the city was formally sentenced for lese-majesty, which implied the loss of her privileges and property, while the guilty had earned death penalty. In a demonstrative act, Charles «conceded» a revision of the urban constitution after the symbolic submission of five hundred leaders of the revolt, all kneeling before him in their underwear, bareheaded, barefoot and with nooses around their necks as a reference to the penalty they really had deserved <sup>6</sup>. The so-called treachery of the episcopal city of Thérouanne, which belonged to the kingdom of France, and of Hesdin was punished by their destruction by the emperor's troops in 1553, «qu'ils rasent jusqu'au sol» says the celebrated historian Henri Pirenne, as if it were the most normal thing to do. In the tradition of the romano-canonic law,

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 331-337.

<sup>6</sup> DECAVELE, J., y VAN PETEGHEM, P., «Ghent "absolutely" broken», en DECAVELE, J. (ed.), *Ghent. In defence of a rebellious city*, Antwerp, 1989, pp. 107-113.

a prince was entitled to the destruction of a city; it was indeed to Carthage that Van Schore was referring in his requisitory against Ghent: «debvroit estre submise a la chaine comme fust Cartaege par les Romains, sans jamais pouvoir porter nom de ville»<sup>7</sup>.

In 1542, the government put proposals for new levies to the States of the various provinces of the Low Countries. After long drawn-out negotiations and firm resistance from especially the merchants, the governess Mary of Hungary decided to enforce the tax «by virtue of the absolute authority of the emperor»<sup>8</sup>. This authoritarian attitude proved not to be rewarding since the revenue of the imposed taxes remained very much below the expectations, as a consequence of passive resistance. Indeed, it tended to negate the States' secular tradition of being entitled to grant or withhold additional subsidies beyond the normal *feudal* cases. In those years, Charles equally tended to impose his imperial authority by force and ceremony vis-à-vis opposing princes. In September 1543, he made Duke William of Cleves fall prostrate before him after the occupation of the duchy of Gueldres and forced him to remarry with a Habsburg princess.

In his campaign against the protestant princes in 1546 and 1547, Charles equally showed himself from his most proud and harsh side by requiring the prostration of the old Duke Ulrich of Wurttemberg. The case of felony was raised against John-Frederic, Elector of Saxony, who was kept as a prisoner in the emperor's following. The same fate was inflicted upon Philip, Landgrave of Hesse, although he had come to the emperor under the promise to be left free in person and property<sup>9</sup>. As is well known, the German princes were so deeply appalled by the emperor's treatment of their peers, that this became the reason for their revolt in 1552 which would ultimately lead to Charles's disgraceful retreat from Germany. In purely political terms, he evidently had overplayed his hand in situations where no doubt can exist about his personal involvement. These four episodes of Charles's «magnificence» belonged typically to the twelve victories or «Triumphs» Philip II commissioned with Maarten van Heemskerck to be propagated in engravings published in 1555-1556.

The third domain in which Charles can be seen as uncompromising is that of his relation as Emperor towards the catholic Church and towards the successive popes, in particular. Charles has focused his entire policy on his role as the first protector of Christianity and of the Catholic Church. Therefore, his relations with the successive popes were absolutely central. After his initial success with the election of his preceptor and councillor Adrian of Utrecht, the latter's sudden death in 1523 left the emperor with Medici and Farnese popes whose prime interests lay in Italian politics and in the avoidance of imperial hegemony. They showed little interest in Charles's stubborn concern with the internal reform of the Church —such as his preceptors in the Low Coun-

<sup>7</sup> BOONE, M., «Destructions des villes et menaces de destruction, éléments du discours princier aux Pays-Bas bourguignons», en KÖRNER, M. (ed.), *Destruction and Reconstruction of Towns*, Bern, 2000, II, pp. 104-105; PIRENNE, H., *Histoire de Belgique*, Brussels, 1923, III, p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> TRACY, J. D., *A financial revolution in the Habsburg Netherlands*, Berkeley, 1985, pp. 81-91.

<sup>9</sup> KOHLER, A., *Karl V...*, op. cit., pp. 314-318.

tries had taught him, and as the majority of the German Diet, including most Catholics, wished to see implemented. The cardinals and Pope Clement VII even had good reasons to fear any attempt to criticise the current practices in the Church, and therefore opposed vehemently Charles's —or rather Adrian's— idea of calling a general council. Nevertheless, as time went on, Charles's policy towards the German protestants implied ever more strongly the discussion in a general council, to be held within the borders of the Holy Roman Empire, of the dogmatic and organizational matters raised by the Reformation movement.

Charles targeted his entire policy on his role as the *miles Christi par excellence*. This is how he had Titian eternalised his portrait right after the Mühlberg battle in 1547, and later on how he was sculpted by the Leoni's. In 1535, he took personally the lead of what was called a crusade, the expedition against the Muslim occupation of Tunis. He would be heading in person all major battles during the next twenty years, exposing himself to real dangers such as passing bullets, and to physical strain and pain. All his battles got a religious connotation, even those against France, since they either prevented him to take action against the infidel or the heretics, or, even worse, the king of France even made alliances with these enemies of Christianity. Charles made his purpose most of all clear in the Crépy Treaty in 1544: after a major and rather successful joint campaign with King Henry VIII, he gave up both his territorial gains and his alliance with Henry just to oblige Francis to commit himself to participate in a Crusade, to end his support to the German protestants, and to support the convention of the Trent Council.

Charles always behaved very respectful towards the successive popes, even when they did not show the same involvement in the defence of the Church and of Christianity as he did. In his instructions for his son Philip from 1548, he admitted that the popes had not really served him well in the past —the last reference he implied was the withdrawal of papal troops the year before in the midst of the campaign against the German protestant princes. Nevertheless, he insisted that Philip «should always behave as a good and obedient son of the Church, and without providing the popes with a good reason of discontent with him», «con la sumisión que un buen hijo de la Iglesia lo debe hacer, y sin dar a los papas justa causa de mal contentamiento vuestro»<sup>10</sup>. Clement VII and Paul III had postponed the convention of a council during nearly twenty years. Paul did nothing, when it finally convened since December 1545, to avoid the traditionalist majority of the council fathers making any open debate with the protestants impossible. He had agreed with the transfer of the Council from Trent to Bologna, which would exclude the participation of the German protestants, which had painfully been convinced by Charles's diplomacy to meet somewhere within the borders of the Holy Roman Empire. By their attitude, the popes and the cardinals wrecked Charles's long lasting efforts to keep negotiations with the protestants open, and to try and keep

<sup>10</sup> FERNÁNDEZ ÁLVAREZ, M., *Corpus documental de Carlos V*, Salamanca, 1971-1981, II, p. 577.

them within a reforming Catholic Church. This failure finally made the emperor's position in the Empire impossible, since all his endeavours since 1530 to continue talks and to make provisional concessions in the hope of a nearby settlement by a council, by 1548 proved to mere chimeras. Charles did not carry on his threat, launched after long hesitations in 1548, to continue the Trent council under his own authority<sup>11</sup>. Even after these disillusionings, he remained loyal and obedient to the pope and admonished his son to behave similarly.

One really wonders if Charles was so ill-informed about the intentions of the papal Curia that he focused all his hopes upon their benevolence and insight. By putting all his assets upon this option, he made himself extremely vulnerable and dependent on Rome. He had already shown to be more consequent in his strife to protect the unity of the Church than the popes themselves, but he failed to see the Curia's reluctance to discuss its own wheeling and dealing. The primacy of Charles's policy lay in matters strictly connected with religion, while the popes pursued primarily secular targets. He did not conclude from his repeated failures to convince Clement VII and Paul III, that his conception of a universal Catholic Empire lacked any solid basis. When, by 1548 his main option had shown to be chimerical, he lacked the flexibility to adapt to the situation. Other rulers, such as Henry VIII or Francis I showed to be much less dogmatic. Even Ferdinand had drawn other conclusions from the situation than his brother: he took his distance from Rome —eventually he did not take care of papal coronation any more— and took the irreversibility of Protestantism for granted.

The fourth domain in which one can see Charles's attitude as uncompromising is that of the unity of the Habsburg dynasty. From his very first personal contacts with his brother, he unambiguously insisted upon his priority rights as the eldest heir; in this context, he chased Ferdinand quickly out of Spain in 1518 and claimed without any concession his nomination as the Roman King. During the whole of Charles's reign, Ferdinand had to obey to the emperor's instructions, as had their sisters. The unity of the dynasty had to be conceived as a unity of its direction. This system worked rather well until the succession crisis in the 1550-1551 winter, when Ferdinand for the first time refused to let Charles's views and dynastic interests prevail not only on his own, but also on what he considered to be the interest of the empire. The compromise reached through the delicate mediation of Mary of Hungary, would never be implemented, as a consequence of the revolt of the protestant princes, including most of the North-German rulers who opposed both the alleged Habsburg inheritance rights and the «Spanish tyranny» under which they felt to be subdued.

The impossibility to achieve his principal targets of the dynastic unity under his or his son's leadership, and the unity of empire and Church under the joint leadership of pope and emperor, brought Charles from 1553 onwards to withdraw from the empire

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<sup>11</sup> KOHLER, A., *Karl V...*, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

and to refuse to take any responsibility for political acts the imperial Diet might take against his own conscience.

A related aspect of Charles's firm opinion on the dynasty, is his concept of legitimacy. We already discussed his high thinking of the rights of the emperor. As the head of the Habsburg dynasty, he felt responsible for the preservation of their patrimonial rights. Although he did not take any serious action for the recovery of the duchy of Burgundy, on which he had raised strong claims in the Madrid treaty of 1526, and on which he continued to insist in legal terms in the Cambrai treaty of 1529, he negotiated again about these rights in the Crépy treaty of 1544<sup>12</sup>. Inversely, Charles limited his military actions strictly to territories upon which either the empire or his dynasty had old claims. In Lombardy, Tuscany and Lorraine these belonged to the empire, in North Africa, Naples and Navarre to the Trastámara dynasty, and in Tournai, Luxemburg, Friesland and Guelders to the Burgundians. Even the 1536 invasion in the Provence took place in a formerly imperial territory which had been promised to his ally Charles de Bourbon. The occupation of Cambrai in 1543 equally concerned an imperial fief. On the other hand, the legally untenable invasion in Champagne in 1544 was given up after months only, since it simply seemed to have been meant as a means to put pressure on Francis I to make him join the emperor in his principal missions: to launch a crusade against the heathen, to favour the convention of a council in an imperial city in order to reform the catholic Church and to combat the «damnable sects» of protestants.

As a fifth matter in which Charles showed himself as uncompromising, one should also consider his consequent intervention in city governments. After all the urban revolts in the Low Countries, in Spain, in Italy and in southern Germany, he steadily had the guilds excluded from the local administration and put it in the hands of an oligarchy. The series started as early as his so-called Joyous Entry in Ghent 1515, which had been the occasion for popular turmoil in favour of urban privileges. The *comuneros* revolts in Spain could not be immediately subdued with great military power, but it nevertheless resulted in the exclusion of the popular organisations from the administration. After the occupation of Tournai, in 1521, the guilds were excluded from the administration of the city. In 1525, 1528 and 1532, «rebelliousness, commotion and various crimes» in «s-Hertogenbosch and Brussels led to repression and the imposition of new ordinances which «took power out of the hands of the people, of which I certainly approve», as Charles wrote to the governess, his aunt Margaret. The most dramatic case is the well-known Ghent revolt of 1537-1540, after which a demonstrative repression was led by the emperor in person, and the whole corporative structure was reformed in an authoritarian way, breaking the power of the labour aristocracy of their political representatives. Similarly, in 1546-1547, Charles's campaign in southern Germany resulted equally in the reformation of the administration of dozens of cities in an oligarchic

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 292-293.

sense<sup>13</sup>. Through his whole reign, he systematically favoured local elites with whom it was easier to strike deals than with unruly artisans and peasants.

While Charles undeniably was driven by a number of principles to which he kept firmly, and in some cases even in a stubborn way, in other matters he gave obviously in and showed his pragmatic or tolerant side. In this section again, five domains will be discussed. After having observed in the first section of this paper the emperor's insistence on the legitimacy of the claims of the empire and of his dynasty, here we have to point to his leniency with regard to claims which he saw to be unattainable in practice. This evidently applies to his non-intervention for the recovery of the duchy of Burgundy and of Württemberg, which was lost for Habsburg in 1534. He equally showed much patience with William of Cleves, whose rights on the duchy of Guelders Charles claimed to be invalid, but whom he subdued only in 1543, after five years of tolerance. Most striking, however, are Charles's repeated proposals put forward to Francis I in 1536, 1539 and in the negotiations at Crépy in 1544, to cede either the duchy of Milan or the whole of the Low Countries, as a bride's gift in the case of a marriage between one his own or Ferdinand's daughters with a younger son of the king. He obviously considered such an alliance as a formidable guarantee for a lasting peace between Valois and Habsburg, which in turn was a necessary condition for the pursuit of the emperor's primary mission as the protector of the Church. The deal was finally impeded in 1545, both by the opposition of the king's eldest son Henry and by the death of the envisaged bridegroom. Charles's repeated propositions clearly demonstrate a hierarchy among his principles: for him, peace among the Christian kings in order to protect the unity of Christendom evidently prevailed over Habsburg dynastic interests.

The second domain in which Charles showed his pragmatic side, is that of his political alliances. Notwithstanding his harsh rejection of any form of religious «sectarianism», he continued his alliance with Henry VIII, and he in the end accepted to come to terms with the Lutheran King Christian III of Denmark. In October 1545, Charles even struck a truce with the Turks, in order to have his hands free against the German protestant princes. In 1552, he went as far as to strike an alliance with the breaker of the imperial peace and protestant Albrecht Alcibiades of Brandenburg, simply because he badly needed his military support for the campaign in Lorraine. In all these cases, strategic reasons prevailed over religious rigor. When he really needed the support or neutrality of an heretic or heathen, Charles was able to put aside his religious fanaticism.

The third domain of Charles's pragmatism was, curiously enough, religion. Personally, he had no deep interest in dogmatic matters, but he showed great willingness to leave these to theologians from catholic and reformed sides, hoping that they might reach an agreement among themselves. From the Diet in Augsburg in 1530 onwards, he fav-

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<sup>13</sup> BLOCKMANS, W., «The Emperor's Subjects», en SOLY, H. (ed.), *Charles V 1500-1558 and his time*, Antwerp, 1999 (in Spanish translation: Yuste, 2000), pp. 258-272.



oured talks between theologians of different obediences. By this procedure, he provided the representatives of the Augsburg Confession with some kind of legitimacy and he even was prepared to accept the agreement in the committee and issue it as a concordat. It were, however, the negative reactions in wider circles that impeded the agreement to be issued as an imperial law<sup>14</sup>. In 1532, a new agreement between catholics and protestants was reached in Nurnberg, including some guarantees for non-prosecution of the latter. In return for military support against the Turks, Charles tolerated the progressive implantation of Protestantism, believing that a council would soon meet to settle the dogmatic and ecclesiastical matters. Things remained very much the same during the emperor's lasting absence, which meant that in many regions Protestantism could expand freely. When Charles returned in 1541, he installed again a theological «Colloquium» in the margin of the Diet at Regensburg, which presented a partial agreement, refuted again by the political representatives of both sides. During many years, he thus tried to reach agreements by negotiation, accepting some of the principles of the protestants. He may have underestimated the strong motivation on the protestant side, and he certainly failed to take into account the reluctance of the Curia against the general council he was advocating. By 1545, he became aware that the cleavage he had contributed to, had become unbridgeable. In the meantime, he had tolerated the spread of the «sects» in order «to avoid greater grief» in the form of further Turkish progress.

Looking at the practice of religious persecution, the number of executed death penalties that can be traced in the extant sources in some provinces of the Low Countries between 1520 and 1555 amounts to 169, the total of persecutions to 1473. Extrapolated to the whole of the XVII Provinces, the latter might rise to somewhere between 4,000 and 8,000 cases, with peaks between 1542-1545 and 1551-1555<sup>15</sup>. The sharp tone of the ordinances against the «heretics» might have frightened people, but the reality of the persecution was that no more than 0.009 per cent of the population have ever been inculpated and 0.001 per cent executed. No wonder that Protestantism expanded rapidly in the Low Countries as well. Was this intentional tolerance from the side of the government? The repetition of the ordinances rather points in the direction of protection by the lower authorities, which hampered the implementation of imperial policy.

A similar observation can be made in the domain of legislation, which we might consider as the fourth domain of the emperor's pragmatism. In the period 1506-1555 a yearly average of 37 ordinances were issued for the whole of the XVII Provinces of the Low Countries. They reflect a tendency of the central government towards the homogenisation of law, which had grown from many different local and regional cus-

<sup>14</sup> GRUNDMANN, A., «Die Beschwerden der deutschen Nation auf den Reichstagen der Reformation», in LUTZ, H., y KOHLER, A. (eds.), *Aus der Arbeit an den Reichstagen unter Kaiser Karl V.*, Göttingen, 1986, pp. 95-105.

<sup>15</sup> GOOSENS, A., *Les Inquisitions modernes dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux (1520-1633)*, Brussels, 1998, II, pp. 95-107, 188-192.

tomary traditions. In October 1531, a series of legal measures reformed the structure of the central government and prescribed a wide variety of rules of public order, somewhat similar to those issued one year earlier in the empire. It was also ordered that all local authorities were due to write down within six months their customary law, in order to have it scrutinized by the provincial and central councils of justice and to be issued as «homologised» law. The result was extremely meagre: although the ordinance had been re-issued in 1532, 1540 and 1546, by 1579 only 334 local laws had been presented to the provincial councils, of which no more than 21 had been homologised<sup>16</sup>. Insofar as there was centralisation of government and legislation, it hardly functioned on the level of the emperor's dominions beyond his own person and his immediate environment of courtiers, councillors and secretaries. Charles did not impose foreign rulers in his different territories in really significant numbers. This implied that each locality, each province and each kingdom continued very much to apply its traditional rules, notwithstanding some hopeless endeavours from the emperor to impose more homogeneity.

The field in which the empire was after all most integrated, was that of money and finance, since the empire and its bankers moved subsidies from one region to another, depending on the needs of the moment. Financial administration is the fifth domain to be considered from the viewpoint of the emperor's pragmatism. The fiscal pressure rose considerably during Charles's reign, even if one takes in account the rising population and the economic growth. War years provoked sudden steep increases in tax demands, which the representative assemblies grudgingly accepted in most cases. These increases could only be imposed by negotiating all kinds of favours with the delegates, for their constituencies as well as personally. In this process, the representative bodies obtained more power and financial returns for themselves. So, they collaborated up to a point with the government, but also obstructed any systematic tax reform aiming at a more equal distribution of the burden. Government initiatives in this respect, taxing by percentage wealth and trade were introduced in the early 1540s but met with such a fierce resistance from the local elites, that they remained unsuccessful and had to be withdrawn<sup>17</sup>.

Are these cases to be considered as examples of the impossibility for an imperial government in the first half of the sixteenth century to impose any kind of administrative homogeneity and observation of the centrally imposed law? Certainly, the emperor repeatedly showed highly impatient by the slow reactions of his territories to his commands. He simply had no choice than to accept the slowness of the changes he wanted

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<sup>16</sup> MOORMAN VAN KAPPEN, O., «Stadtrechtsreformationen des 16. Jahrhunderts in den Niederlanden», en *Lex Loci*, Nijmegen, 2000, pp. 139-148.

<sup>17</sup> BLOCKMANS, W., «The Low Countries in the Middle Ages», en BONNEY, R. (ed.), *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe, ca. 1200-1815*, Oxford, 1999 pp. 297-305; *L'escarcelle de Charles Quint. Monnaies et finances au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Brussels, 2000.

to introduce, and to live with various arrangements with local powers, which contributed to the perpetuation of the traditions.

What then, was the share of principle, pragmatism or, maybe, strategy in Charles's reign? From 1535 onwards, warfare dominated all other aspects of political and economic life in his dominions. This may be considered as a consequence of his principal political aims, directed at the protection of Christianity and the Church, and the preservation of their unity. For them, he esteemed no price too high. Beyond Charles's control was the sharp increase in the costs of warfare, as a result of the military revolution which necessitated huge investments in the building of fortresses and artillery. For the same reasons, armies had to increase in size by a factor three, while staying in the garrisons and in the fields almost without interruption. This led in a few years to a general doubling of the per capita fiscal burden in real terms, and to a tremendous increase of the public debt. Economic life suffered severely, financial markets became exhausted by 1555. In his farewell address to the States General in Brussels in October 1555, Charles deplored this nearly continuous warfare, but blamed the others for the need to wage them. If true, this would imply that the emperor was unable to pursue his own strategy, but instead had to react to threats from his enemies. Indeed, all his major military campaigns from 1535 onwards reacted on aggression.

Charles had to face the unprecedented, unrepeatable and probably impossible mission to rule over a huge and scattered empire in a time of formidable challenges. Any other, maybe more talented ruler, may also have failed in his place. In his defence, one should observe that he managed to defend and even expand his territories against ongoing French and Ottoman attacks. But he failed in two of his other main aims: he failed to «exterminate the heresy» and to keep the Habsburg empire united. His lack of strategic flexibility, in particular his insufficient understanding of the dogmatic motivations of the Reformation, of the effects of protracted mass propaganda and of the situation in Germany generally, are to be considered as the reasons of this double failure. A more flexible ruler such as Ferdinand may have found more peaceful and lasting solutions.